

Will Harper wobble on child care? [CA] ^[1]

Reality Check

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EXCERPTS

From the start, Stephen Harper's child care plan was one of those ideological touchstones from which there would be no deviation. Or so it seemed.

It was hardly surprising that on the day his new cabinet was sworn in, Harper announced "cabinet has decided and reiterated our plan to proceed with our plans for day care." So let there be no mistake about it.

What was surprising was that on the same day, he was on the phone to Quebec Premier Jean Charest, suggesting there might be some kind of special deal, a transition period for the province before Ottawa would cut off funds for its child-care program.

Around the same time as Harper acknowledged the possible transition period for Quebec, his spokesman, William Stairs, insisted, "We have a plan for child care. We ran on that plan and we intend to put (it) into place."

As for the other provinces that all have varying commitments to child care, Stairs said, "We'll see what happens." That certainly sounded as though Stairs was trying to play a game of Harper-good-cop/Harper-bad-cop all by himself.

And there was the child-care plan on top of that & which turns out to be not really a child-care plan, but a resurrection of the old baby bonus.

Start with Quebec. In the late 1990s, Quebec launched a child-care program that was the envy of child-care advocates everywhere in the country. With a charge of \$7 a day for each child, it was astonishingly cheap for parents, albeit expensive for the provincial treasury.

The former Liberal government began negotiations with the provinces last year on a national child-care plan because it was going to mean \$5 billion for the provinces over five years & a substantial financial boost for any provincial treasury.

Instead of money to expand programs, the Harper government has promised to cancel the Liberals' national child-care plan as of the end of March next year. The reason, as Harper explained, is: "We certainly don't want the federal government to tell us how to raise our children."

Instead, the Harper government is promising to pay parents \$1,200 a year for every child under six. The parents could spend the money as they wish, but the government describes it as a plan for child care.

The Child Care Advocacy Association calculates that when decreased benefits and increased taxes are calculated, a two-earner family with two children, with a family income of \$30,000, would get just \$460 per child of that \$1,200; a family with an income of \$40,000 would get \$671 per child, and one with \$50,000 would get \$827 per child.

The Caledon Institute of Social Policy says the Harper plan is unfair because it pays less to poor and modest income families and more to middle- and upper-income families. And the plan would do "little if anything to increase the supply of affordable, quality child care," the institute says.

Harper did well in Quebec in the recent election campaign & he won 10 seats, compared to none in the previous campaign. But if he wants to form a majority government in the next election, he is going to have to win more seats in Quebec.

But going out of his way to help Quebec is not necessarily going to win Harper support elsewhere in the country, as other federal governments have discovered.

And other provincial governments have already started squawking at the thought of a special deal for Quebec on child care. The premiers have already held a conference call to discuss a united front against Harper, to address the threat of cuts in child-care funding.

- reprinted from CBC News Online

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